

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



THE MAURICE WOHL
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Holy Times

Emor - 21 May 2016 / 13 Iyar 5776

The parsha of Emor contains a chapter dedicated to the festivals of the Jewish year. There are five such passages in the Torah. Two, both in the book of Exodus (Ex. 23: 14-17; 34: 18, 22-23), are very brief. They refer only to the three pilgrimage festivals, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. They do not specify their dates, merely their rough position in the agricultural year. Nor do they mention the specific commands related to the festivals.

This leaves three other festival accounts, the one in our parsha, a second one in Numbers 28-29, and the third in Deuteronomy 16. What is striking is how different they are. This is not, as critics maintain, because the Torah is a composite document but rather because it comes at its subject-matter from multiple perspectives – a characteristic of the Torah mindset as a whole.

The long section on the festivals in Numbers is wholly dedicated to the special additional sacrifices [the *musaf*] brought on holy days including Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh. A memory of this is preserved in the Musaf prayers for these days. These are holy times from the perspective of the Tabernacle, the Temple, and later the synagogue.

The account in Deuteronomy is about society. Moses at the end of his life told the next generation where they had come from, where they were going to, and the kind of society they were to construct. It was to be the opposite of Egypt. It would strive for justice, freedom and human dignity.

One of Deuteronomy's most important themes is its insistence that worship be centralised "in the place that God will choose," which turned out to be Jerusalem. The unity of God was to be mirrored in the unity of the nation, something that could not be achieved if every tribe had its own temple, sanctuary or shrine. That is why, when it comes to the festivals, Deuteronomy speaks only

of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, and not Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur, because only on those three was there a duty of *Aliyah le-regel*, pilgrimage to the Temple.

Equally significant is Deuteronomy's focus – not found elsewhere – on social inclusion: “you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites within your gates, and the stranger, the orphan and the widow living among you.” Deuteronomy is less about individual spirituality than about the kind of society that honours the presence of God by honouring our fellow humans, especially those at the margins of society. The idea that we can serve God while being indifferent to, or dismissive of, our fellow human beings is utterly alien to the vision of Deuteronomy.

Which leaves Emor, the account in this week's parsha. It too is distinctive. Unlike the Exodus and Deuteronomy passages it includes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It also tells us about the specific mitzvot of the festivals, most notably Sukkot: it is the only place where the Torah mentions the *arba minim*, the “four kinds,” and the command to live in a sukkah.

It has, though, various structural oddities. The most striking one is the fact that it includes Shabbat in the list of the festivals. This would not be strange in itself. After all, Shabbat is one of the holy days. What is strange is the *way it speaks about* Shabbat:

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The Lord said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: The appointed times [*moadei*] of the Lord, which you are to proclaim [*tikre'u*] as sacred assemblies [*mikra'ei kodesh*]. These are my appointed festivals [*mo'adai*]. Six days shall you work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of sabbaths, a day of sacred assembly [*mikra kodesh*]. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a sabbath to the Lord.”

There is then a paragraph break, after which the whole passage seems to begin again:

These are the Lord's appointed times [*mo'adei*] festivals, the sacred assemblies [*mikra'ei kodesh*] you are to proclaim [*tikre'u*] at their appointed times [*be-mo'adam*].

This structure, with its two beginnings, puzzled the commentators. Even more was the fact that the Torah here seems to be calling Shabbat a *mo'ed*, an appointed time, and a *mikra kodesh*, a sacred assembly, which it does nowhere else. As Rashi puts it: “What has Shabbat to do with the festivals?” The festivals are annual occurrences, Shabbat is a weekly one. The festivals depend on the calendar fixed by the Bet Din. That is the meaning of the phrase, “the sacred assemblies *you are to proclaim* at their appointed times.” Shabbat, however, does not depend on any act by the Bet Din and is independent of both the solar and lunar calendar. Its holiness comes directly from God and from the dawn of creation. Bringing the two together under a single heading seems to make no sense. Shabbat is one thing, *moadim* and *mikra'ei kodesh* are something else. So what connects the two?

Rashi tells us it is to emphasize the holiness of the festivals. “Whoever desecrates the festivals is as if he had desecrated the Sabbath, and whoever observes the festivals as if he had observed the Sabbath.” The point Rashi is making is that we can imagine someone saying that he respects the Sabbath because it is God-given, but the festivals are of an altogether lesser sanctity, first because we are permitted certain kinds of work, such as cooking and carrying, and second because they depend on a human act of fixing the calendar. The inclusion of Shabbat among the festivals is to negate this kind of reasoning.

Ramban offers a very different explanation. Shabbat is stated before the festivals just as it is stated before Moses’ instructions to the people to begin work on the construction of the Sanctuary, to tell us that just as the command to build the Sanctuary does not override Shabbat, so the command to celebrate the festivals does not override Shabbat. So, although we may cook and carry on festivals we may not do so if a festival falls on Shabbat.

By far the most radical explanation was given by the Vilna Gaon. According to him, the words “Six days shall you work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of sabbaths,” *do not apply to the days of the week but to the days of the year*. There are seven holy days specified in our parsha: the first and seventh day of Pesach, one day of Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, the first day of Sukkot and Shmini Atseret. On six of them we are allowed to do some work, such as cooking and carrying, but on the seventh, Yom Kippur, we are not, because it is a “Sabbath of Sabbaths” (see verse 32). The Torah uses two different expressions for the prohibition of work on festivals in general and on the “seventh day.” On the festivals what is forbidden is *melekheth avodah* (“burdensome or servile work”), whereas on the seventh day what is forbidden is *melakhah*, “any work” even if not burdensome. So Yom Kippur is to the year what Shabbat is to the week.

The Vilna Gaon’s reading allows us to see something else: that holy time is patterned on what I have called (in the Introduction to the Siddur) *fractals*: the same pattern at different levels of magnitude. So the structure of the week – six days of work followed by a seventh that is holy – is mirrored in the structure of the year – six days of lesser holiness plus a seventh, Yom Kippur, of supreme holiness. As we will see in two chapters’ time (Lev. 25), the same pattern appears on an even larger scale: six ordinary years followed by the year of Shemittah, “release.”

Wherever the Torah wishes to emphasize the dimension of *holiness* (the word *kodesh* appears no less than twelve times in Lev. 23), it makes systematic use of the number and concept of seven. So there are not only seven holy days in the annual calendar. There are also seven paragraphs in the chapter. The word “seven” or “seventh” occurs repeatedly (eighteen times) as does the word for the seventh day, *Shabbat* in one or other of its forms (fifteen times). The word “harvest” appears seven times.

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However, it seems to me that Leviticus 23 is telling another story as well – a deeply spiritual one. Recall our argument (made by Judah Halevi and Ibn Ezra) that almost the entire forty chapters between Exodus 24 and Leviticus 25 are a digression, brought about because Moses argued that the people *needed God to be close*. They wanted to encounter Him not only at the top of the mountain but also in the midst of the camp; not only as a terrifying power overturning empires

and dividing the sea but also as a constant presence in their lives. That was why God gave the Israelites the Sanctuary (Exodus 25-40) and its service (i.e. the book of Leviticus as a whole).

That is why the list of the festivals in Leviticus emphasizes not the *social* dimension we find in Deuteronomy, or the *sacrificial* dimension we find in Numbers, but rather the *spiritual* dimension of encounter, closeness, *the meeting of the human and the divine*. This explains why we find in this chapter, more than in any other, two key words. One is *mo'ed*, the other is *mikra kodesh*, and both are deeper than they seem.

The word *mo'ed* does not just mean “appointed time.” We find the same word in the phrase *ohel mo'ed* meaning “tent of meeting.” If the *ohel mo'ed* was the *place* where man and God met, then the *mo'adim* in our chapter are the *times* when we and God meet. This idea is given beautiful expression in the last line of the mystical song we sing on Shabbat, *Yedid nefesh*, “Hurry, beloved, for the appointed time [*mo'ed*] has come.” *Mo'ed* here means a tryst – an appointment made between lovers to meet at a certain time and place.

As for the phrase *mikra kodesh*, it comes from the same root as the word that gives the entire book its name: *Vayikra*, meaning “to be summoned in love.” A *mikra kodesh* is not just a holy day. It is a meeting to which we have been called in affection by One who holds us close.

Much of the book of Vayikra is about the holiness of place, the Sanctuary. Some of it is about the holiness of people, the Cohanim, the priests, and Israel as a whole, as “a kingdom of priests.” In chapter 23, the Torah turns to the holiness of time and the times of holiness.

We are spiritual beings but we are also physical beings. *We cannot be spiritual, close to God, all the time.* That is why there is secular time as well as holy time. But one day in seven, we stop working and enter the presence of the God of creation. On certain days of the year, the festivals, we celebrate the God of history. The holiness of Shabbat is determined by God alone because He alone created the universe. The holiness of the festivals is partially determined by us (i.e. by the fixing of the calendar), because history is a partnership between us and God. But in two respects they are the same. They are both times of meeting (*mo'ed*), and they are both times when we feel ourselves called, summoned, invited as God's guests (*mikra kodesh*).

We can't always be spiritual. God has given us a material world with which to engage. But on the seventh day of the week, and (originally) seven days in the year, God gives us dedicated time in which we feel the closeness of the Shekhinah and are bathed in the radiance of God's love.

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